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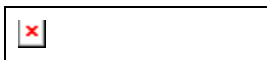
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The Basement Files

By Business Journal Staff

A message to fledgling entrepreneurs: Clean your basement.

Thursday's Ernst & Young West Michigan Entrepreneur of the Year Awards ceremony at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel drove that point home when nearly half the winners claimed to have started their enterprises in the basement of their home.

But if the basement was a starting point for many, the Ambassador Ballroom was the culmination of that journey.

The EOY awards were bestowed in nine categories. A story about the winners appears on page 1 today.

Here, however, we offer some of the quips from West Michigan's top entrepreneurs who delivered sometimes poignant, sometimes rambling and frequently funny acceptance speeches, which presumably were unrehearsed since the winners were kept secret until the actual presentation.

"Five or six years ago a few of us were sitting in my basement and the phones were ringing and we were really scared," said **Gary Tilkin**, president and CEO of Global Futures & Forex Ltd., winner in the financial services category. "Well, the phones are still ringing, and that's good, because we've got a lot of business."

Thomas Highley, CEO and president of The Empire Co. and winner in the business and consumer services category, had spent the better part of the day with one of his longtime clients at a golf outing in Arcadia. He returned just in time for the reception and ceremony.

"For one of the few times in my life, I'm actually speechless," he said. "The truth is, this is not a Tom Highley story, it's an Empire team story."

Keith Brophy, CEO of Sagestone Consulting and winner in the realizing business potential category, followed up on that theme, listing his four ingredients to success as "people, people, people and people." Brophy, too, started his venture in his basement and spent plenty of time around a conference table from Big Boy that was "borrowed ... or stolen."

Michael Garrett, president of Pinnacle Construction Group and winner in the real estate construction category, started his run in borrowed office

space at his brother's law firm. He didn't take a salary for the first three years. "I look at myself as the head coach of a great team. I feel blessed to get up every day and lead that team."

The underground theme continued with **Wayne Visbeen**, president of Visbeen Associates, who won in the real estate design category. "I started my business, like so many of you, in my basement," he said, adding that his staff is the key to his success. "I get to go to work and just marvel at what they accomplish."

In the manufacturing category, **Karlis Vizulis**, president and CEO of Performance Systematix, drew plenty of laughs with this: "When I walked into the reception hall and saw that all the tablecloths looked just like my bowtie, I thought, 'Wow, this might be pretty good.'" But he ended his heartfelt acceptance speech on the verge of tears. "As an immigrant to the country in 1958, I can truly say I have lived the American Dream. I am truly honored to accept this award for my company and my family."

There also was a trio of special categories.

In the emerging category, honoring companies that have been in business less than five years, Comfort Research's **Chip George** and **Matt Jung** obviously were caught by surprise and humbled by the experience.

"The first thing I gotta say is it was really my Mom who sewed the first Foof Chair," said George, who went on to thank everyone from the pair's banker, to their lawyer to their competitors, "especially the good ones." Jung added that he, too, was overwhelmed by the honor. "Being the only one in the category, I don't know who we gave a beanbag to, but it really worked out for us."

Rita Williams, who took home the title of Master Entrepreneur, shone brightly in a sea of black while wearing an electric green suit that was outshone only by her smile at the podium. The board chairman and CEO of Gill Industries and owner of The Sierra Room thanked her 12 kids, her employees and especially her husband, **John**, but couldn't resist a quick jab at her other half. "John enjoys telling people that I need two jobs to support his retirement," she said, adding, "retirement is not on my agenda."

John Gordon and **Paul Gordon**, of Gordon Food Service, earned the Lifetime Achievement Award and were able to reminisce about entrepreneurialism — and basements.

"Ours started in 1897," said John Gordon, adding that he didn't know whether GFS started in a basement. "Paul's old, but even he wasn't around yet."

Fittingly, Paul Gordon wrapped up the evening with an observation that entrepreneurs regardless of business sector could identify with.

"There's a lot of craziness in this room," he said. "You've got to be crazy to be an entrepreneur. There's a surprise every minute you're an entrepreneur."

And sometimes, like Thursday, those surprises can be very nice.

- Local barkeeps and restaurateurs had a bit of a surprise last week, too, when one of the largest conventions to date took over DeVos Place.

Steve Wilson, who heads of the CVB, was talking to Convention and Arena Authority board members last week about the Wesleyan Church gathering being in town. He said he visited a few downtown nightspots to see how business was with the big convention going on. Upon entering one unidentified place, someone there said to him, “You have a 6,000 (delegate) convention in town and none of them is buying a drink!”

Well, there’s some food — or beverage — for thought. **BJX**

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